United Nations A/58/93/Add.1

General Assembly

Distr.: General
10 June 2003

Original: English

Fifty-eighth session
Item 131 of the preliminary list*
Joint Inspection Unit

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the implementation of multilingualism in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit for the consideration of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled "Implementation of multilingualism in the United Nations system" (JIU/Rep/2002/11).

* A/58/50/Rev.1 and Corr.1

03-39241 (E) 030703

Summary

The present note contains the comments of the Secretary-General and of the members of CEB on the JIU report "Implementation of multilingualism in the United Nations system".

The JIU report deals with the challenges facing the organizations of the United Nations system of maintaining and improving the multilingual content of services required by the universal character of the United Nations system. It also dwells on the impact of the language policies of the United Nations system organizations on their interaction with member States and other stakeholders, such as civil society and the private sector.

CEB members appreciate the analysis and findings of the report and generally agree with its conclusions. In considering the recommendations of the report, CEB members took into account the need to strike a proper balance between improving multilingualism, given its well-known positive impact on the overall performance of the organizations of the system and the satisfaction it brings to its Member States and clientele groups, and the considerable investment and operating costs needed to achieve it. That balance is determined not only by the priorities decided by the Member States themselves but also by the effectiveness of policies, strategies and practices of the organizations of the system in the implementation of multilingualism, and the sense of shared responsibility that exists between Member States and the secretariats.

I. Introduction

1. The preparation of the JIU report entitled "Implementation of multilingualism in the United Nations system" (JIU/Rep/2002/11) was prompted by the reiterated requests of legislative bodies to adhere strictly to the principle of equal treatment of languages, which has been a recurring issue on the agendas of many governing bodies, including the General Assembly. In its resolution 50/11 on multilingualism, the General Assembly recalled that the universality of the United Nations and its corollary, multilingualism, entail for each Member State of the Organization, irrespective of the official language in which it expresses itself, the right and the duty to make itself understood and to understand others. The Assembly also emphasized the importance of providing access for all Governments and all sectors of civil society to the organization's documentation, archives and data banks in all official languages, and it requested the Secretary-General to ensure the strict implementation of the resolutions establishing language arrangements for both the official and working languages of the Secretariat.

2. The present report reviews the use of languages in organizations of the United Nations system to provide interpretation and translation services for various types of meetings and for general communication and dissemination of information. According to the JIU report, many meetings attended by representatives of Member States continue to be held without interpretation or without documents available in all prescribed languages. Such a situation may contribute to the marginalization of some linguistic groups, particularly from developing countries, to the extent that it prevents them from contributing on an equal footing to the outcomes of these meetings.

II. General comments

3. CEB members generally concur with the findings and conclusions of the report and find the report's recommendations acceptable, in principle. They appreciate the useful guidelines provided in the report for reviewing the status of multilingualism in their respective organizations as well as on possible courses for action, including the roles played by Member States and the secretariat in a shared responsibility approach to improve multilingualism.

4. As regards the capabilities of the organizations of the system to provide language services, some CEB members take the view that organizations of the system are not quite as competitive as they could be in view of the prevailing salary conditions. They observe that considerable difficulty is still being encountered in the recruitment and retention of staff with the necessary linguistic skills.

III. Comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

On the basis of data to be submitted by secretariats indicating for each language the level of language services being currently provided in relation with meetings and for the dissemination of information, legislative bodies may wish to review and clarify the status of the different languages used in their

organization so as to provide further guidance on Member States expectations thereof, along the following principles:

(a) Within the framework of applicable rules governing the use of languages, the prime objective of language arrangements for any meeting should be to provide to all participants an equal opportunity to contribute to the legislative process or to the formulation of the meeting's outputs as the case may be;

(b) For meetings of governing bodies and other intergovernmental meetings, language arrangements as called for in the rules of procedure should be strictly adhered to, unless otherwise decided by the membership; when secretariats are unable to provide pre-session documents in all prescribed languages for reasons beyond their control, they should exceptionally submit such documents temporarily in abridged format or executive summary in the concerned languages within the established deadlines;

(c) Other categories of meetings such as expert group meetings or seminars should be organized taking into account the language proficiency of those called upon to attend;

(d) While languages used for the dissemination of information should aim at outreaching to the largest extent possible targeted audiences in the framework of the mandate of each organization, their scope should include all languages normally used by each organization, due regard being given to those applicable at field level.

5. While CEB members support the principle underlying this recommendation, i.e., language requirements should be a reflection of the needs of the target audience, a degree of flexibility should nevertheless be allowed in the choice of languages for certain types of meetings so as to ease the burden on the services concerned. They also suggest that the language requirements mandated in their organizations' rules of procedures, and the rules themselves, should be reviewed from time to time to ascertain whether they reflect actual needs.

Recommendation 2

As part of their reporting on the use of languages, executive heads should submit to their governing bodies information on the status of languages used for work within the Secretariat and in that connection, they should indicate:

(a) The requirements for establishing an enabling environment to foster the strict application of rules concerning the use of mandated working languages, including the availability of databases and research tools;

(b) The implications of using or not being proficient in a de facto working language in terms of recruitment policies and career development;

(c) The extent to which other languages are used by staff from all duty stations to perform their official functions and incentives which may be provided to that effect.

6. This recommendation is acceptable in principle. With respect to recommendation 2 (a), CEB members recognize that the central question here is reporting the capacity of the organizations of the system to satisfactorily fulfil

translation and interpretation needs, which more often than not entails balancing the availability of capacity and work load at any given period of time. As regards recommendation 2 (c), the reference to "incentives" is unclear.

Recommendation 3

For the sake of transparency and to give every candidate as fair a chance as possible of winning a post, heads of secretariats should ensure:

(a) That the rules as to the languages which it will be considered essential or advantageous for candidates to know are uniform and take into account the linguistic requirements of the post in question;

(b) That the mother-tongue requirement is, where appropriate, replaced by a principal-language-of-education requirement;

(c) That posts in the Professional category and above are classified by the language requirements they entail and that the classification is reflected in the periodic reports on human resources management or the composition of their secretariat that they submit to their governing bodies;

(d) That, in accordance with the rules on the use of languages within the secretariats, the possibility of early access to vacancy announcements via the Internet does not give any language group an unfair advantage; to that end, and save in exceptional circumstances to be justified by the recruitment unit, all vacancy announcements should be issued simultaneously in, as appropriate, at least two of the secretariat's working languages or two of the organization's languages;

(e) That candidates who do not have access to the Internet are able to consult vacancy announcements and submit job applications online at the organization's local office or the office of the United Nations system's Resident Coordinator.

7. This recommendation falls within the sphere of the human resources management policies and practices of each organization of the system, and as such its implications vary from one organization to another. Generally speaking, however, subject to specific considerations by each organization of the system, the recommendation is acceptable in principle.

Recommendation 4

Heads of secretariats are invited to ask evaluation and/or internal monitoring bodies to include in their programmes of work for 2004:

(a) A comprehensive inventory of staff's language skills, an evaluation of language-training programmes in terms of their contribution towards their stated aims and a report in the most appropriate form to governing bodies on those activities.

(b) A survey both internally and among the beneficiary countries most directly concerned in order to check, particularly when a beneficiary country's official language is not the secretariat's usual working language or a language known to project implementation officers, that the level of language skills in

relevant departments does not delay the approval and efficient implementation of projects.

Multilingualism to better serve Member States and other stakeholders (chapter III)

8. This recommendation is generally acceptable. CEB members underscore the fundamental importance of ensuring that the concerned staff of the organizations of the system possess the necessary linguistic skills required by their respective clientele countries/Member States and/or target populations with whom they have to interact frequently in the course of their work.

Recommendation 5

As appropriate, executive heads should undertake a survey to better assess user satisfaction with the services provided in different languages in the context of meetings and for the dissemination of information; targeted groups for such a survey should include not only linguistic groups of Member States, but also representative groups of NGOs and accredited representatives of news media.

9. This recommendation is generally acceptable. CEB members note that user satisfaction is particularly critical in the areas of outreach and public information, and is often a determinant of the extent to which the organizations of the system are perceived both by its member States and the general public to be performing their respective mandate.

Recommendation 6

In order to maintain or improve the quality and multilingual content of outputs provided in the different languages of the organizations:

(a) Executive heads should keep under constant review the workloads and other working conditions of language units and take required corrective measures within their prerogative while submitting to their governing bodies other issues requiring their consideration, guidance or decision;

(b) Governing bodies may wish to reassess their needs for recurring documentation and to reconsider current provisions related to the submission of documents originating from Member States in order to supplement efforts made by secretariats towards the overall reduction of documentation and their timely submission.

10. Recommendation 6 (a) is acceptable in principle. Some members of CEB pointed out that the workload of their respective language units are indeed reviewed regularly, alongside with the planning of documentation for meetings and other activities requiring substantial language interpretation and translation services. As also reflected in the comment on recommendation 2 (a) above, the critical issue in this regard is the capacity to respond to the multilingual services requirements of the Organization as a whole. Experience has shown that the provision of effective language services often involves a degree of "crisis management" from one meeting to another to ensure that translation and/or interpretation services are provided as and when needed, in addition to well-advanced document planning.

11. CEB members support recommendation 6 (b) in view of its potential to facilitate significantly the ability of organizations to manage its documentation and language services and keep costs to a minimum without compromising user satisfaction.

Recommendation 7

Legislative bodies may wish to:

(a) Decide that, as a matter of policy, the regular budget should be the prime source of funding to support efforts aimed at reducing current imbalances in the use of languages, in conformity with approved resolutions and decisions;

(b) Request that, for future budget cycles and through appropriate consultations with Member States, executive heads should submit in the proposed programme budget predefined objectives for improved multilingualism and expected results derived from phased priorities, due regard being paid to all opportunities for partnerships and from extrabudgetary sources of funding;

(c) Request executive heads to indicate in particular in their budget proposals the languages in which planned publications will be issued as well as languages in which information materials will be posted on the different web sites; in that connection, they should demonstrate that languages and related resources used for these outputs are linked to the attainment of expected accomplishments;

(d) To monitor progress made when considering either specific reports on multilingualism, or reports on programme performance in which pertinent indicators should be included.

12. While recommendation 7 (a) is acceptable in principle, some CEB members suggest that a distinction be made between core secretariat services, for which funding should come from regular budgetary sources, and special projects which could be funded from partnerships and extrabudgetary resources, to meet pressing demands for the use of languages. However, it is not clear how "current imbalances in the use of languages" are to be determined and by whom.

13. CEB members take the view that the aim of "improved multilingualism", as called for in recommendation 7 (b), laudable as it may be, should be balanced with the willingness to devote often substantial investments to build the enabling environment so necessary to achieve it.

Recommendation 8

Executive heads should encourage or continue to encourage their staff and particularly their senior staff to foster a cultural change within secretariats by making fuller use of their linguistic capabilities which should be translated into more visible indicators in the workplace.

14. This recommendation is acceptable.

Recommendation 9

In his capacity as chairman of CEB and in the framework of the annual reports of CEB to the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General of the United Nations should indicate the extent to which CEB machinery is contributing to enhance the multilingual content of its own web sites and to foster for all its stakeholders an improved access to information on global issues from the web sites of its members.

15. This recommendation is acceptable in principle.